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## Soft Power is not an oxymoron

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**Abstract:** The rising anti-American sentiment is for the most part not yet directed at American culture or values or citizens, but rather, at American policies. As the World Public Opinion organization reports, a recent BBC World Service poll found that out of 33 countries surveyed, Iran was the only country with more negative ratings than the US. The rising anti-American sentiment is for the most part not yet directed at American culture or values or citizens, but rather, at American policies, which have seemed to follow the unilateralist, arrogant, hypocritical, and moralistic maverick cowboy image over the world leader.

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Although many political commentators and policy makers often invariably end up repeating what sounds like tired partisan jabs on a continuous loop, every now and then a new concept can really frame and define the debates of that generation ; George Kennan's "containment," Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations," and Joseph Nye's "soft power" are three such examples. Nye, who was an Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs at the DOD before entering academia at Harvard's Kennedy School, verbalized a critically important concept in post Cold War strategic thought : soft power also matters. Nye's argument, often misunderstood, is not that hard power doesn't matter or that the United States should use more carrots and less sticks in its diplomacy. Nye's fundamental argument is that it's important to foster and then use the power of attraction your culture has that makes others want what you want, since, as he succinctly describes, "attraction is much cheaper than coercion" ("Propaganda Isn't the Way : Soft Power," *International Herald Tribune*, January 10, 2003).

Few would disagree that since 2001, there has been a marked decline in world perceptions of the United States. As the World Public Opinion organization reports, a recent BBC World Service poll found that out of 33 countries surveyed, Iran was the only country with more negative ratings than the US. And yet American soft power still seems strong. Higher education in the US remains the global standard. No other nation boasts as diverse and robust of a civil society as the United States. McDonalds and Coke patronizing consumers around the world are still overwhelmingly pro-America, as about 88 percent of respondents in countries as unlikely as Egypt, Turkey, and Indonesia tended to prefer American brands over local brands, as reported by the *Financial Times*. Even though the French love to hate McDonalds, they also, by and large, love to eat there, too.

The rise in anti-Americanism, despite the Bush Administration's simplistic assertions, it not based in others' "hate" of "our freedoms," but rather others' hate in how we have conducted our foreign policy and, in their view, how we have abused our hard power capabilities, speaking loudly

while carrying a big stick. The rising anti-American sentiment is for the most part not yet directed at American culture or values or citizens, but rather, at American policies, which have seemed to follow the unilateralist, arrogant, hypocritical, and moralistic maverick cowboy image over the world leader and key supporter for institutions like the United Nations, NATO, the WTO, the IMF, and the non-proliferation regime created by the NPT image – which is good news, of sorts, because policy is easier to change than culture.

Soft power is not an oxymoron. It is an important element of any foreign policy strategy, and one that should be taken more seriously than a mere academic exercise. Although coercion, with carrots and sticks, is just as important as before, perhaps more emphasis on attraction could avoid “The Long War” from needing to be all that long. Or all that much of a war. The real threat to America’s soft power is not necessarily coming from radical political Islamists as much as from us forgetting what principles we value most : reinvention, freedom, equality, and hope. The detention center in Guantanamo Bay, top US government officials flirting with sanctioning torture, and isolationism all threaten these very ideals. In fighting a global war on terrorism and transforming our military, we must remember that although we need robust and versatile hard power capabilities in order to effectively coerce others, we also need even more robust and versatile soft power capabilities so that we won’t have to. March 22, 2006